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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000282

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN, DRL, PPD
EUR/CACEN FOR EUGENIA SIDEREAS AND MARGARET PAWLICK
DRL FOR KIMBER SHEARER AND WENDY SILVERMAN

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: ARMENIAN POLITICIANS POSTURE AFTER "WIDER
EUROPE" PRONOUNCEMENTS IN TBLISI, EU VISIT

[1](#)1. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified. Please treat
accordingly.

SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (SBU) Recent statements by EU officials in Tblisi suggesting a more concrete role for the South Caucasus countries in the "Wider Europe" initiative incited an unusual surge of Euro-friendly political posturing in Armenia. GOAM officials and politicians went so far as to characterize the January 28-30 visit of EU Special Representative Heikki Talvitie as a sign of Armenia's "privileged" place in Brussels' South Caucasus agenda. Talvitie told us January 29 that a policy of simultaneous visits to all three South Caucasus countries was important to maintain equity and avoid accusations of favoritism. End summary.

EUROPE ON EVERYONE'S MINDS -- OR AT LEAST LIPS

[1](#)3. (U) The EU's January 27 statements suggesting a more concrete role for the South Caucasus states in the "Wider Europe" initiative incited an unprecedented surge of public statements regarding Armenia's EU policy by Armenian politicians. MFA officials welcomed the announcement with the traditional pro-Europe talking points but added stronger language asserting Armenia's position as forerunner for eventual EU membership. FM Vartan Oskanian's statement following the visit of EU Special Representative Heikki Talvitie linked the EU initiative to the successful lobbying efforts by President Robert Kocharian during his December visit to Brussels. Comment: The unusually aggressive tone of the MFA statements appeared to be a face-saving measure after Javier Solana and EU leaders did not visit Yerevan while in the region for the inauguration of Georgian President Saakashvili. End comment.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Even politicians not normally vocal regarding European integration entered the fray in late January. Pro-government newspaper Golos Armenii, normally neutral on matters related to Europe, praised the statement as "basically a declaration of quasi-EU-membership." Opposition leaders took a different approach. They used the opportunity to criticize the GOAM for "sluggishness" in adopting new laws and Council of Europe commitments. Dashnaksutiun (ARF) newspapers carried editorials ranging from skeptical to mildly enthusiastic about Armenia's possible role in an expanded Europe. Some ARF leaders remarked that GOAM efforts toward European integration must not "water down" the government's approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict or relations with Turkey. ARF member and National Assembly Foreign Relations Committee Chair Armen Rustamian's comments were more optimistic. He took advantage of the debate to credit traditional Armenian allies such as Greece and France with championing Armenia's cause as a potential European partner.

EU SPECIAL REP ON WIDER EUROPE, GEORGIA

[1](#)5. (SBU) EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus Heikki Talvitie told us during a January 29 meeting with the Ambassador that he was cautiously optimistic about the role of countries like Armenia in the Wider Europe initiative. He said that GOAM leaders had been receptive to his visit and

generally realistic about the implications of the "Wider Europe" initiative. He commented, however, that maintaining a perception of parity between the three South Caucasus countries was more important than ever for his office. Visits to the region henceforth would likely include stops in all three capitals in light of government sensitivities or perceived favoritism. He credited recent events in Georgia with hastening the EU's warmer approach to the region. He reported, however, that some in the EU were taken aback by the Georgian government's fervor when hoisting the EU flag as part of Saakashvili's inauguration ceremony. According to Talvitie, while technically appropriate (given Georgia's membership in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe), the use of the EU flag symbolized the dangers involved with runaway expectations regarding EU membership in the Caucasus. He, like every other credible outside observer, believes the prospect of EU membership is a distant goal, at best.

COMMENT: USING THE EU AS A LEVER

16. (SBU) Most of our GOAM interlocutors are quite realistic on the prospect of EU membership. They see this prospect as useful over the next few years as a principal driver of the economic reform agenda, and ensuring that Armenia retains its free market orientation. In addition, they see utility in gradually conforming Armenia's reform efforts to EU and European standards -- a useful exercise even if membership is a distant, even unachievable goal. Given that background, it strikes us that this public eruption of Euro-enthusiasm could be counterproductive if it generates unrealistic expectations that cannot be achieved soon -- or perhaps ever.

ECONOMICS ASIDE, A POLITICAL FLIRT WITH THE WEST

17. (SBU) COMMENT (continued): The recent flurry of political commentary demonstrates that issue of closer relations with Europe has matured into a permanent domestic political issue in Armenia. While it is unclear to what extent political parties understand the EU accession process or the timeframes involved, they correctly estimate the issue's cachet with Armenians at home and abroad. In urging Talvitie and the EU to continue to manage expectations with the Armenians in order to avoid future misunderstandings or disappointment we should also urge them to point out the more intangible, political benefits of Armenia's current Euro-enthusiasm. With the exception of hard-line skeptics who link Euro-friendly policies with concessions on N-K or Turkey, it appears that a pro-European stance will be de rigueur in Armenian politics for the foreseeable future.
ORDWAY